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ABSTRACT

Techniques and approaches useful for developing reading comprehension and reading skills in second language learners are discussed and illustrated with examples from German. Literature is reviewed on: the effectiveness of reading while listening, transfer of skills and knowledge from one language to another, the role of guessing in reading comprehension, and the contrastive method of second language learning. Exercises for vocabulary development, dictionary use, transformation and recognition of difficult common words and cognates, language awareness, inflection, global text comprehension or extensive reading (including recall), and detailed or intensive text comprehension are suggested. (MSE)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION IN FL TEACHING - COMBINING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL

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1 Introductory remarks

After a period of stressing communication and social relations in FL teaching, which meant stressing oral proficiency, reading comprehension has again come to the fore. Certainly, this is in some part due to the frustrations arising from the communicative approach, which leads to such phenomena as pidginization and fossilization as learners are linguistically overstrained, or to oversimplified forms of communication. In productive skills about 85% of errors seems to depend on the level of FL proficiency (Esser 1984 : 151f.). In reading, this percentage might be far lower, as other factors like reading comprehension in L1 or extratextual knowledge will influence the level of comprehension. The fact that communication is two-sided, i.e. that understanding also plays a part in it, has often been overlooked. Yet another reason why the receptive skills have come to the fore might be the socioeconomic situation : the fact of being better informed could be important in finding a job. New trends in research precede the development of new methods. The already extensive literature on reading has increased enormously lately (Pugh 1982 : 7 f.).

Reading and listening are seen not only as goals in themselves, but in the "receptive method" also as the effective first stage of language acquisition and learning in general (Schouten-van Parreren 1983 : 22 ff.). This method claims that exposure to the language helps to develop cognitive models of lexical use and grammatical structures - what we often call "linguistic feeling". That reading and listening are receptive and active skills is a conception now largely accepted. Learners can react to the information, if necessary in L1. Use of L1 is another new and useful trend in FL teaching.

2 Reading while listening

A highly discussed subject is the question of whether students in a reading comprehension course should listen to the text being read aloud while they themselves are reading it. There are arguments against this. Listening while reading could contribute to the wrong impression that a text has always to be read linearly and completely. Neither does it improve reading speed. On the other hand, silent reading is accompanied by speech muscle activity. "Whether this trace of subvocal activity or inner speech ever completely disappears is highly controversial" (Pugh 1978 : 25, cf. 25 ff.; Bennet 1975 : 45; Desselmann et al. 1981 : 259). The more unfamiliar the language, and, one might add, the word, the more throat activity there is.

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This is useful, as it supports the processing of information. Reading while listening develops fluency in foreign languages and might improve reading comprehension (Leong 1984 : 43; Pugh 1978 : 27 f.; Schouten-van Parreren 1983 : 26; cf. Leont'ev 1974 : 87, 103). For memorization it is helpful to have more than one channel for the information; another argument for combining reading and listening (Desselmann et al. 1981 : 149). This does not mean that every text should be read aloud or always the whole text, but - especially at the beginning of a reading course - texts, or parts of texts, can be read aloud often, though in general only after a first quick silent reading by the learners. However, it has been argued that it might be better to restrict the reading aloud to short or easy words in the beginning (Mehr 1984 : 82 ff.). Didactic arguments for doing some listening while reading are that a student in a reading course might want to acquire other skills later and that variety in method is a strong motivational factor in itself.

3 What is reading?

What reading comprehension consists of is not very clear. The basic mental processes have not been explained. The problem with reading research is that the reading process cannot be studied directly. There is a lot of research, which started mainly in Europe in the last century but the bulk of which has been done in the USA in this century. Nearly all the research is about reading comprehension in L1 and much of it does not go beyond the sentence level. With interest in text linguistics this has now changed. The difficulties in constructing theories about reading show that we have not yet come very far. This difficulty is perhaps illustrated by the fact that introspection, which was used by Ebbinghaus for memorization with himself as a subject in the last century (Kintsch 1970 : 139 f.) is now being used again with several subjects informants. Introspection can be a teaching device in class too, if one student explains to another one how he or she arrives at comprehension of a certain passage. An interesting survey of research into reading is given by R. de Beaugrande (1981 : 261 ff.). He approaches the subject from the cognitive point of view, stressing information processing and text structure. He leaves out the motor aspects of eye movement and subvocalization. These latter aspects are not important for FL learning, of course, as long as we are concerned with languages with the same kind of writing. The psycholinguistic approach partly overlaps the cognitive approach, but pays more attention to syntactic and semantic aspects, as well as to memory and the role of the senses. In the communicative approach the social side of reading is stressed, with interest being shown in the reading goal, in motivation and in the reader's expectations and the author's intentions. All approaches can be helpful for teachers.

4 Reading a foreign language

Since we can't study them separately the question of whether there are subskills in reading and, if so, what they are has not been

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resolved (e.g. Pugh 1978 : 75 ff). For didactic purposes it might be sensible to presume that there are subskills, for "whenever there is some kind of structure in the learning material, verbal learning is facilitated" (Kintsch 1970 : 427). In FL teaching we are normally dealing with learners who have already achieved a degree of proficiency in the reading skill itself. This means that a number of subskills can be adopted for reading a FL. "The native language assumes the role of a meta-model of language itself, i.e. of a set of expectations about how any language is organized" (de Beaugrande 1984 : 12). We can apply cognitive structures or reference frames like scripts or schemes - abstract concepts that give a model of the world - when reading in the FL. Processes of scientific thinking, for example, are more or less independent of the linguistic system and "such textual cues as paragraph organization, definition and classification are similar in different languages" (Ulijn 1984 : 72). We know what a sentence or a word is. The reader takes his background of experience with him, his "knowledge of the world". Although there can be differences in the culture of the FL, these are only minor compared to the linguistic problems. But more than in L1, reading a FL is a problem-solving process, the construction of hypotheses is more important, when linguistic factors are not fully under control. When reading a FL it is necessary to be able to use all the information provided by the text in order to compensate for the linguistic gaps. This means that guessing is a very important skill. Affective factors may play a different role in reading the FL than in L1. The interest in the FL or fear of the difficulty of the task will influence the acquisition of the skill.

It is evident that it is in the language-based part of the reading process that the new factors are to be found. There it is probably better to talk of knowledge than of skills, although the two cannot be separated completely. New words and phrases have to be recognized, which implies knowledge of lexis, morphology and syntax. But a large part of this knowledge will have to function automatically, i.e. on the unconscious level. The difficulty lies mainly in the surface text. Text structure will be less of a problem, although differences in culture, e.g. in scientific tradition, do play a role.

5 The role of guessing

The main skill for a rational development of reading comprehension in a FL is probably guessing. When teaching German to Dutch-speaking students one starts to train guessing because it is so evident, the languages being very close. Learners will understand a number of words without guessing, but when guessing is normally rewarded with a high rate of success - the vocabulary is enlarged considerably with the help of L1. The training of contextual guessing where L1 doesn't help is then the next step. Van Parreren and Schouten-van Parreren call this "the most specific skill for foreign language reading" (1981 : 236). This means that the use of as much information as context - and former experience - can provide, has to be trained, as well as analyzing word forms to use all the information contained in parts of the word. However, the use of guessing is a

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good strategy for vocabulary learning, as mental activity on the part of the learner in finding the meaning will improve retention. Help from the teacher may be necessary though, since it is very important to guess the right meaning, in order to prevent error memorization (Schouten-van Parreren, and van Parreren 1979 : 265 f.). Van Parreren and Schouten-van Parreren give a survey of where guessing can go wrong. They give a hierarchy of levels for the guessing : 1. syntactic, 2. semantic (context and knowledge of the world), 3. lexical (word form, e.g. affixes or cognates), 4. stylistic (1981 : 238 ff.). This hierarchy is useful for the teacher, who will have to start his questioning from a given level according to the nature of the difficulty encountered. Sometimes, but not always, all levels may be necessary. In this case the teacher could start with the question "what kind of word is it?" before going on to "what is the text, paragraph or sentence about?"

Apart from a number of special vocabulary exercises, we work with a lot of authentic reading material. Most frequent words will be learned incidentally, because they occur so often. The students are asked to mark difficult words clearly in the text, so that revision is always in context. Difficult words include not only deceptive cognates, but also those where contrast is lacking because they look familiar through their resemblance to other words or to parts of other words, either in L1 or in the FL (Juhász 1970 : 92 f. and Lutjeharms 1981 : 88). Guessing skills, of course, are not only important for vocabulary. The reader needs them on the text level as well. But guessing on both levels interacts. A wrong hypothesis about text content leads easily to wrong decoding of vocabulary, and an error in word meaning often leads to a complete misunderstanding of a passage or sometimes of a whole text, as the reader tries to find coherence in the text. Part of the work of the teacher lies in making the learner conscious of guessing skills, since the learner will not always apply them automatically to the FL situation. Besides, they will enhance the preparedness to start reading a FL.

6 Contrastive method

The use of a contrastive method will in general improve reading comprehension. It means that the learners are made conscious of all they already know before having started to learn the FL, but it also, of course, involves an insistance on the special difficulties of the target group. Positive transfer may be rather limited, when comparing for example Finnish and German, but another FL might be helpful, in this case some experience with Swedish and English. The possibilities of transfer will also depend on the text type; in LSP lexical transfer will normally be more important than in common language.

7 Exercises

If the teaching of reading is part of a course in overall language proficiency, the approach will be quite different from a

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course where reading is the only goal. In the case of a strict reading course, some parts of grammar for instance will be left out, whereas others will be treated differently. Before proceeding to the exercises it should be mentioned that we are here concerned not with all text-based exercises, but only with those intended to develop FL reading comprehension. These can be classified as : 1. exercises preparing and accompanying the reading, 2. exercises on global text comprehension or extensive reading, 3. exercises on detailed text comprehension or intensive reading. This is a kind of hierarchy, as one level will support the next one, but it does not always mean that the exercises must be in a rigid order. Variety is important. Obviously, not all the exercises to be presented have been devised by the author. The reader will certainly know most of them already and be able to add other types. The intention is to show what kind of exercises proved to be useful in our experience, which consists mainly of teaching LSP to university students. Obviously, the main reasons for adopting certain methods or materials should be : firstly, the needs and motivation of the learners and, secondly, the motivation of the teacher and his/her belief in the method.

Before starting to work on any exercise or assignment, the learners should get clear instructions about the objectives and procedures. Insight into reading styles can be a help (on reading styles see Pugh 1978 : 52 ff.). It is important for them to know what they are doing and why. The learning attitude and the level at which information is processed will change according to the assignment.

7.1 Exercises preparing and accompanying the reading

The bulk of these are vocabulary exercises. There are strong indications that most of the difficulties experienced in reading a FL are lexical rather than syntactical, which does not however mean, especially at the intermediate level, that syntax is no problem (Ulijn 1984 : 69 ff.; Bhatia 1984 : 91 f.). In reading LI, word knowledge appears to be a good predictor of reading comprehension (Thorndike quoted by Pugh 1978 : 77), just as word recognition for the FL (Doering 1982 : 182 ff.). Exercises that ask learners to manipulate words and to reflect on their structure and/or meaning can be expected to improve reading skills, since doing something with a word results in more learning success than just trying to memorize it.

7.1.1 Vocabulary exercises

7.1.1.1 The first vocabulary exercise is meant as an introduction to the use of a dictionary. Words are given in declined and conjugated forms, or as derivations and compounds that are not in a dictionary in this form, verbs with separated prefixes etc. The dictionary form has to be found, often by guessing, but indications for succesful guessing are given, e.g. how to find the infinitive of an irregular verb. Dictionaries are used in class from time to time, and for a limited time at the examination. When students ask for the meaning of a word while working with a text, they are asked to give the dictionary-form of it and to identify the kind of word it is, e.g. a verb,

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on the basis of form and/or position in the sentence.
7.1.1.2 For frequent difficult words and deceptive cognates transformation and recognition exercises and exercises filling in the gaps have been made. All examples are extracts from longer exercises.
- Transformation, e.g. for the modal verbs "sollen/müssen" ("sollen" is a deceptive cognate).
  - Die Änderung hat das Ziel das Stadtverkehrssystem zu verbessern. Die Änderung soll/muss ....
  - Es ist unbedingt notwendig, in Zukunft eine Überforderung zu vermeiden. Man soll/muss
- Recognition : which words or expressions have the same meaning?
  - modal verbs / paraphrases
  1. Ich muss diesen Auftrag durchführen
  2. Ich darf diesen Auftrag durchführen
  etc.

  a. Ich habe die Absicht
  b. Man erwartet es von mir
  etc.

  - internationalisms and difficult German words or deceptive cognates

a. Thema	1. Verfahren
b. Faktum	2. Vorgang
c. Prozess	3. Tatsache
d. Methode	4. Gegenstand

The puzzle aspect of these exercises makes them very popular.
- Filling in the gaps
First the meaning of a group of words is explained, then a text with gaps for these words follows. These texts or sentences are usually not authentic, as they would be difficult to find. There are for instance exercises on the word group "öffentlich, offen, offenbar", which are all deceptive cognates, on the numerous meanings of "Wirtschaft" and "wirtschaftlich", or on the nouns with the prefix "Er-", where lack of contrast comes into play. Crossword puzzles on difficult vocabulary are another kind of gap-filling exercise and are certainly more popular.
7.1.1.3 Language awareness tasks have been constructed on word formation, to give insight into morphological variants and lexical compounding. They are meant as a kind of very guided guessing. Mastery of the process of nominalization, affixation and compound word formation enlarges vocabulary enormously in an efficient way. Such exercises structure knowledge, thereby reducing the memory load.
- compound word formation
What word is defined by what paraphrase?

1. der Transportbehälter	a. Behälter zum Transportieren
2. der Behältertransport	b. Transport in (von) Behältern
3. der Kontrollraum	c. Kontrolle eines Raumes
4. die Raumkontrolle	d. Raum, in dem kontrolliert wird

- derivation
exercise on the meaning of common affixes

die Herstellung	herstellen	herstellbar	die Herstellbarkeit
die Verwendung	.....	.....	.....

exercise on adjectives

die Härte	härten		.....
die Wärme	(er)...		.....
die Grösse	vergrössern		.....
die Breite	.....	(cf. verbreiten)	.....

to introduce adjective affixes : pick out opposite pairs :

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lebhaft	leblos, tot, ruhig
lebendig	lebensunfähig
lebensfähig	ruhig

This kind of exercise is used also after a reading assignment with a text. A number of nouns and verbs are underlined in different ways; the nouns have to be transformed into verbs and vice versa. This can be done only after systematic derivation exercises. An easier exercise is to look for all compounds or derivations with a certain item, e.g. "Arbeit" in a strike leaflet. The meaning of these words is then discussed.

7.1.2 Exercises on grammatical points

7.1.2.1 Perception exercises
Complete beginners are asked to look for inflectional indicators with the help of declension tables. In a short text all visible declined forms have to be underlined. A discussion follows on what e.g. an —er - ending can mean. This is done also with singular and plural nouns, prepositions etc. Of course, here texts are needed with frequent and varied appearances of these endings or words.
7.1.2.2. Transformation exercises on text segments, that are used mainly for reinforcement.
- questions that are asked in order to change the case
  Text : "Das Geheimnis[1] des ungebrochenen Schweizer Wirtschaftserfolges, darin sind sich Arbeitgeber und Gewerkschaften weitgehend einig, liegt in der erprobten Kompromissbereitschaft der Tarifparteien". (Die Zeit).
  1. Wozu führte die Kompromissbereitschaft der Tarifparteien?
  2. Mit wem sind sich die Gewerkschaften weitgehend einig? (Antwort mit dem bestimmten Artikel)
  3. Was gibt es zwischen den Tarifparteien? (Antwort mit dem unbestimmten Artikel)

A quick recognition of inflectional indicators is the learning goal for these exercises. Although many inflectional indicators are redundant, they may be important in some cases, esp. in social science texts, where a sentence starting with an object is less rare than in natural science texts. These exercises clearly involve productive skills, but this can be stimulating and it supports memorization and automatization. Another grammatical exercise consisting of questions on a text is constructed in such a way that all the answers have to be subordinate clauses.
- A different type of exercise consists of transformation or construction of nominalizations. The construction is at the same time an exercise on the genitive attribute.
Transformation of nominalizations
  Erforschung und Training des Zuhörens.
  ⟶ Er hat das Zuhören erforscht und trainiert.
  Die Aufnahme von Gehörtem. ⟶ Man ....
Construction of nominalizations
  Zahllose Termine werden revidiert.
  ⟶ Die Revision/Revidierung zahlloser Termine.
  Er hielt das erste "Lauscher-Trainingsseminar ab. (Die Presse) ⟶ .....

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This can also be done without a question sheet, just by underlining in the text.

7.2 Reading exercises and assignments

A real reading exercise consists of work on the information provided by a text. If L1 and the target language have little in common, it might be necessary to start with very easy, short texts, like easy book titles, lists etc. with lots of cognates, perhaps with translations to match or with instructions to underline words that are recognized.

7.2.1 Global text comprehension or extensive reading

7.2.1.1 To improve comprehension and information recall it can be useful to start with an "advance organizer" (term from Ausubel), consisting of "appropriate, relevant and inclusive introductory material which provides anchorage for the integration and retention of new, more differentiated information" (Boekaerts 1980 : 131). These can be pictures, statistics or questions by the teacher. If the subject matter belongs to an area the learners are familiar with, the advance organizer may be reduced to a short introduction or introductory remark to concentrate the attention on the subject. A second step is to make use of the ability to predict, to make conjectures on the possible contents of the text. This ability can be taught and improved by guided questioning. It is certainly an essential factor in effective reading (Friedman and Rouls 1980 : 6 ff.). You can start from the title (in newspaper articles often rather from the subtitle), from the introductory paragraph or with a quick skimming. The importance of starting to work with a text as a whole and proceeding from this global view has to be stressed. This is often called the top-down procedure. The predictions have to be very guided in the beginning, as reading can be disturbed by false expectations. It may be necessary to give the meaning of some important words that can't be guessed successfully in advance, in order not to overstrain the learners. On the other hand they have to be made conscious of all they know already, before reading the text, on the basis of frames of reference and former experience.

The first reading task can be to skim the text for an overall impression. You can also combine reading styles, e.g. by starting from a given reading goal, like scanning for a word or a name or search reading to locate information, and switching over to closer reading as soon as there is a passage where the word occurs or the relevant information might be found. It is often useful to set time limits for these tasks. To test text comprehension it is necessary to use L1 with beginners in the FL, as we don't want to use productive skills. The only ways to avoid this would be pictures, figures or a diagram, or perhaps multiple choice questions in the FL, but in this last case we have a completely different and far more difficult reading situation, because of lack of context. Besides, to test comprehension with the help of L1 is probably the most precise way of doing it. Another reason for using L1 is that in long term memory we often store the information without the mediating linguistic material of the FL.

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7.2.1.2 The classic, very general questions on text contents are useful from time to time. The answers may be in L1, especially for beginners.
7.2.1.3 A good exercise for global text comprehension is to identify the different parts of the text structure. This exercise can be guided by giving statements on these parts that have to be related to the text or put into the right order. Use of top-level structure provided in the text improves comprehension skills (Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth 1980 : 86 ff.).

7.2.2 Exercises on detailed text comprehension or intensive reading.

After an extensive reading assignment the students can be asked to read the text rather quickly and mark where they don't understand, i.e. words or structures that interfere with comprehension on the sentence level. They have to learn that they don't always have to understand each word. On the other hand they should be trained in discovering what they don't understand without help. When working with long texts, exercises on intensive reading can be made for parts of the text only. The reading styles for detailed text comprehension will be receptive and responsive; the assignments are partly post-reading exercises. There are many possibilities, which are often inspired by the text itself, by its structure, contents, style or vocabulary. Some examples follow.
7.2.2.1 Ask the learners to distinguish main points from subsidiary points by underlining all important and new information and leaving out details (often examples or explanations), function words or phrases, redundancies etc. This is a good way to learn summarizing. A variation on this is to search for words that label important or essential information, if you find a suitable text for the purpose.
7.2.2.2 Vocabulary questions to point out the importance of the context in finding deceptive cognates are useful. Internal consistency of the text is the only way to discover them. To prevent frequent use of the dictionary, guessing with the help of both L1 (when it is sensible) and context is trained.
7.2.2.3 Complex sentence structures are analyzed, simply starting from the main clause and from there reconstructing the sentence. Yet syntax is not the main problem. There are only a few difficult points, which are discussed, each time they appear. For this purpose it is useful to number the lines, before copying a text.
7.2.2.4 Some texts are suited to the task of looking for certain forms, words or contents, such as those expressing uncertainty or a certain point of view of the author. Other possibilities, especially for beginners, include looking for negations or statements of place or quantities etc. These exercises are mainly meant to have the learners reread the text several times with different assignments for fixation of vocabulary or structures. A variation on this is to give the learners paraphrases of words or sentences, for which they have to find the equivalents in the text.
7.2.2.5 Questions on the contents of the text can also be used for intensive reading. The answers can once again be either in L1 or the FL. Questions can be asked to reproduce text contents, on the intentions of the author, or to compare, to give personal reactions, to classify the information in a diagram ec. On manipulative or dema-

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gogic texts, such as those in "Bild"-Zeitung, revealing questions are made to guide the students in discovering the manipulation by inference. Sometimes students have to ask the questions themselves.

7.2.2.6 A variant on the questions on content matter are the statements on the text, whereby the learners have to decide whether they are in line with the text, different from it or extraneous to it. You can ask the learners to mark the respective passages in the text.

7.2.2.7 Sentences from the text or from a summary of the text can be mixed up. The learners have to find the original order with the help of the text.

7.2.2.8 Specific exercises filling in missing words, e.g. on signal words, like conjunctions, are difficult to make, as it is not easy to find adequate texts. A solution to this problem is to make questions on the text and provide the answer as well, leaving a gap for the conjunction. A list of necessary conjunctions is given beforehand. Other exercises on text cohesion include searching for all the ways in which the subject of the text, for example, is expressed (the noun or name itself, paraphrases, pronouns etc.) or to find the antecedents of pronouns. An interesting exercise, devised by Kühler (1980 : 27), is a text in which the syntax has been changed so that the continuity has been partly lost. The text has to be made coherent again.

Note

I should like to thank my colleague Frank Winter for reading through the English text.

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